



## **The Government Project**



**A research report into a Western Edge Youth Arts project at Kensington Primary School, 2008.**

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## Report Summary

This document is an examination of an innovative Arts Education project that took place at Kensington Primary School between April and August 2008.

As part of the fulfilment of the VELS Civics and Citizenship Domain, the project dramatised stories in which major far-reaching decisions were made by Australian governments impacting on both Australians and people overseas. Students began to understand the '*processes associated with citizenship such as decision making, voting and leadership....and concepts such as human rights and social justice.*' (VELS: Civics and Citizenship Domain, Community Engagement Dimension)

The project developed the concept of global citizenship in the participants; they began to understand the role of government, and the way in which they, as future voters and opinion makers, have an active part to play in government decision making. Our rapidly changing world requires that the citizens of the future should understand issues and events from a global perspective. Having an understanding of the connections between the global and the local means that it is possible to see how things might be changed for the better.

Students were encouraged to look beneath the surface of our multi-cultural society and consider our responsibilities in relation to new migrants, refugees, indigenous Australians and oppressed peoples in other countries in our region. They were introduced to key aspects of Australian domestic and foreign policy leading to a consideration of Australia's place in the world.

The stories were extremely pertinent to the culturally and linguistically diverse school community and touched on the forces that brought many of these families to Australia. Taking part in such a program enabled children of migrant or refugee background to have their stories validated, and children of European background to develop knowledge, respect and understanding through working collaboratively on these stories of survival and resilience.

The students developed *metacognition*: they were able to reflect on their learning and the ways in which the active processes at work in the drama workshops and the subsequent performances were of a different mode to their normal classroom practice.

The plays were presented at an extraordinary performance event at the culmination of the project, and this led to further community education and dialogue within the school community of families and friends.



## **The Government Project – a research report into a Western Edge Youth Arts education project at Kensington Primary School, 2008.**

In April 2008, teaching artists from Western Edge Youth Arts<sup>1</sup> were invited to Kensington Primary School to investigate the subject of decision-making in government (as part of their study of the VELS 'Civics and Citizenship' domain) with the Grade 5/6 cohort. This report is a summary of the project and offers some teacher and student reflections from after the event.

There was to be an initial period of investigation through a drama process, followed by an intensive rehearsal period leading to performance. The aim was to produce a large-scale performance at the end of the project, and it was intended that students would, throughout the project, learn about the process of government and the impact of the decisions made on ordinary people's lives. As one teacher put it:

*Getting the balance between historical events, what went on behind the scenes and more importantly, linking these things to the many lives subsequently affected by these events.*

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly known as SCRAYP, and some students still use this acronym to refer to the program.

There were nearly 70 students from many different cultural backgrounds, and the time–line was 14 weeks from start to finish. The students were divided into three groups and two artists were assigned to each group.

In view of the potentially ‘dry’ nature of the topic, Artistic Director Dave Kelman, in collaboration with the artists and teaching teams, was careful to select particular subjects for exploration that would allow the young people to find an emotional connection to the material. A play needs a story after all – and we needed stories that would make the concept of government exciting and immediate. Three stories were chosen in which Australian government decisions were crucially important to the outcome:

- The Tampa Crisis
- Australia’s intervention in East Timor
- The Stolen Generation

The teaching artists researched these stories prior to first meeting with the students. The stimulus materials for each week’s session [for example, copies of actual historical documents, copies of letters from refugees, accounts from asylum seekers of their experiences, contemporary news reports etc.] were investigated through an intense drama process. The final plays were to be presented together on one evening, so it was important that each one should only last between 20 and 30 minutes. Of course, the amount of material generated by the research would have been enough for plays of two to three times that length, and as part of the play building process, students were presented with and investigated far more material than could eventually be included in the plays. The final selection of material for performance was at the discretion of the artists as the short time–line meant it was not always possible to negotiate this with students.

## **The Plays**

***The Tampa*** – The play told the imagined stories of the refugees picked up by the *M V Tampa* in August 2001, from leaving their countries to their eventual incarceration on Nauru; these stories were based on documentary material – contemporary newspaper reports,

letters from refugees in detention<sup>2</sup>, accounts of parliamentary proceedings, and refugees' stories as told to young people in *Dark Dreams*<sup>3</sup>. Woven through this linear narrative were two folk stories: the story of *Lugalbanda*<sup>4</sup> and *The Girl Who Outwitted a Ghoul*.<sup>5</sup> The first of these is believed to be the oldest story ever written down and tells of a boy who endures great hardships on a journey through harsh mountains, who wins the help of an enormous and terrifying eagle, the 'Anzu bird', in his quest to find his brothers' armies and bring the war to an end. It paralleled the refugees' flight from their homelands.



*The Anzu bird at its nest*

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<sup>2</sup> Sourced from *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres*. Edited by Janet Austin

<sup>3</sup> *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories* by young writers. Edited by Dechian, Millar and Sallis

<sup>4</sup> Sourced from *Lugalbanda: the boy who got caught up in a war: an epic tale from Ancient Iraq* by Henderson and Ray

<sup>5</sup> Traditional

The second story, from Afghanistan, tells of a clever peasant girl who solves the seemingly impossible riddles of a ghoulish hell-bent on destroying a kingdom; it mirrored the refugees' plight at the time when they were repeatedly asked confusing questions by immigration officials. As a grade 5 girl observed, 'in the ghoulish story they were lucky 'cos they had the girl, but the refugees couldn't even help themselves and didn't have the girl to help them'. A Grade 6 girl remarked that 'the refugees told a story about a problem which had been solved, but their problem had yet to be solved'.

***The Stolen Generation*** – The play presented a long historical narrative through a series of vignettes; we saw white settlement including stylised massacre and the grab for land; parliament's adoption of the 'White Australia' policy; children stolen from their mothers, girls trained as domestic servants, the refusal of the last government to apologise and the eventual apology from the Rudd government; we also heard a personal statement from a girl in the group whose mother was of the stolen generation. The mother had told her story to students as part of the research process. Music and movement were a big part of the storytelling style of this piece, including a representation of the rainbow serpent creation myth to open the piece. This last was often mentioned by students, both those in the show and those from other groups, as a favourite moment and one student went further: '...and *Stolen Generation* should have more supernatural stuff, more indigenous stuff woven right through, instead of just at the beginning' (Grade 5 boy). I think this reflected his understanding that an indigenous experience was at the heart of the play.

***Viva Timor Leste*** – The play told the story of East Timor from its mythic beginnings, with a traditional tale about the creation of the island out of a weary crocodile, through to the Indonesian invasion, the story of the Balibo 5, and the successful struggle for independence including Australia's role in that struggle. The journalists' story was told as documentary, but much of the struggle with the army and government of Indonesia was told as allegory – Suharto and his army were presented as terrifying demons intent on human sacrifice. The play pointed out that Timor's struggle was not

with the Indonesian people who were also being oppressed by the Suharto regime.

### **New Media Artist**

In the early stages of the process, students were sometimes asked to respond to stimulus material through drawing and sketching. In particular, in the *Story of the Tampa*, students responded to some of the refugee accounts of escape from war, inter-ethnic violence and perilous boat journeys with stark monochrome images drawn with charcoal on butcher's paper. Many of these were photographed by our new media artist and used as projected backdrops for the play.



*Refugees are interrogated in their nightmares*

### **The Performances**

There were two performances: a matinee to an audience of approximately 170 students from the school at which the project took place and another local Primary School, and an evening performance which attracted a crowd of about 200 people, mostly family, friends and local community. The venue was a large

community hall, and professional sound and lighting technicians were employed to support the students' work.

## **Student Reflections**

One of the concerns of the artistic team was that the material and subject matter of the plays was complex and challenging for children of this age group; it was impossible to tell these stories without considering violence, the horror of war, the awful plight of the dispossessed, disruption of families and cruelty to children, to name just a few of the strands of these real-life stories. To combat the horror, a decision was made to weave mythic or folkloric material into the documentary material, as a foil to the real-life drama for audience and participants alike. The mythic/folkloric material was often funny, providing a release of tension, and sometimes provided a parallel commentary on the documentary story. There were also scenes where a satirical 'cartoonish' technique was used to emphasise meaning.

The subject – the impact and significance of the decisions governments make – had been chosen by teaching staff prior to artists starting the program with the young people; as the suitability of this topic for upper primary kids had been discussed or mentioned at various times, including in audience feedback, I was keen to discover students' opinions. During interviews with students I asked whether they felt the material was too serious or "heavy" for children their age:

*It's like, can you rise to the test? We should have that stuff [on the curriculum], it makes us learn more. [Girl, Grade 5]*

*There's good and bad to it. You can't make a person see differently in a short amount of time. If they talk about it at home they'll get a better grasp, but it's bad to assume people are discussing it with their parents. [Girl, Grade 6]*

*My mum thought it was well done but a bit dark for Grade 5/6. [Girl, Grade 6]*

*My mum thought it was good that it was out there, good that people saw what happened to refugees and what they go through.*  
[Girl, Grade 6]

Significantly, this last comment came from a girl of African background who would know refugees within her cultural community.

A staff member and mother of a participant wrestled with this conundrum – when is it appropriate to inform young people about what is happening in the world?

*I was suppressing within myself a rising urge to protect “these children” from the ugliness of humanity. I realised this was ridiculous as we lived through, and now with, the Tampa affair and the Pacific Solution, Timor and the Stolen Generations. However, these students seem so young to face such harsh realities of our time. I realised this was also ridiculous, they are also living through the impacts of these decisions, they face the consequences already, living in such a multicultural neighbourhood and classroom.*

*These grade five and six students have learned at the outset of their adult life, a healthy dose of scepticism for governments and authority. It seems they have realised how important it is to develop your own view, look for the facts behind the media and official line, to take action even it is against the flow of peers or the general masses. This is indeed a skill for life! [Audience Feedback, August 2008]*

There seemed to be a genuine desire from the young people to grapple with the truth of the stories they were telling, even when in some cases it had caused them to feel strong emotions:

*Girl, Grade 5: I liked it where there were the photos of real stuff behind [the projections of actualities] – the lines we said meant something. We said something someone who is dead now said. What they said meant something.*

Girl, Grade 6: *Like respecting the person who said it.*



*Painting the Australian flag – actuality behind action*

It's possible to see here that the students have a sense that what they enacted was important somehow because it was *true*. The moment where the audience sees a projection the famous newspaper picture of the Australian journalist painting the Australian flag on the wall of the house in which they are taking shelter from the Indonesian army was brought up again later, in an interview with two different students:

Girl G, Grade 5: *I liked the moment with the picture, the flag picture...cos it's where people have died and you can see it, where they were. So it made you feel sorry for the people and it made me feel a bit spooky too...*

Girl C, Grade 6: *Yeah same, but it's seeing a photo of someone who's dead, but they are still alive on stage. In the photo, they wouldn't be thinking they'll be dead in a couple of hours, they're just 'taking a photo', so it felt weird. In the photo they didn't know – they can't see the future. But we do know.*

Other students also commented on the fact that because much of the material was documentary it had a big impact:

*Ramos' speech... it was about what was REALLY happening, that only the East Timorese knew about what was happening. And Ramos is talking about what is really happening. And he is not telling any lies, it's all just truth. And it's what's really happening.*  
[Girl, Grade 5]

I have deliberately documented all the student's repetitions and emphases because they help to show how passionate she felt about the story being 'real' which was a quality she felt was important. Although our representations of those events were not naturalistic, the truth of the story gave the play its depth and gravitas.

In *Viva Timor Leste* there was a stylised scene depicting the Dili Massacre, where peacefully demonstrating adults and children were shot down in cold blood. Given what the girls had said about the photo scene above, I asked about this scene – were they aware of it being a portrayal of a real event as they enacted it, and was it difficult to represent such awful events?



*The peaceful demonstration*

*Girl R, Grade 5: In the protest, I think how the expression on our faces said it all. It was really strong and effective, and I really thought people were moved by it.*

*Girl C, Grade 6: Holding the banner was pretty full-on when people are dying all around you. You're acting something which changed people's lives...but at least a couple of actors wouldn't have realised how real it was. You know - it actually happened.*

Part of this comment refers to the fact that a couple of students found this moment quite hard to depict seriously. I asked director Dave Kelman whether he thought that there were children who in Girl C's words 'wouldn't have realised how real it was':

*When we investigated the massacre scene through improvisation it was a really profound experience for all of us who were there. We set it up so the kids were role-playing students at school who knew about the demonstration, and were planning to up and leave their*

*school desks to attend. We generated a huge amount of excitement and anticipation as the children talked to one another, just as any group of students would be excited about a big event they were planning to attend together. We enacted up to the point where everyone was at the demonstration, chanting, singing, with women carrying traditional baskets of flowers to symbolise their peaceful intention, and then I stopped the drama and read out an account of the massacre that followed. Everyone was shocked, but also moved. I think they all understood the gravity of it. What Girl C is perhaps referring to, is that some people had difficulty representing those final moments because it was so confronting, not because they didn't understand it.*

Students from the *Tampa* play also found that their story being grounded in real events gave it a greater impact:

*Girl N: Reading out of the letters [excerpts from actual letters written by asylum seekers in Australian detention centres] made me feel emotional.*

*Girl O: Yeah, reading out of the letters really touched people. They thought, 'hang on, this is what those people have been through', it was real.*

*Girl A: Yes, the letters, [were her favourite moment] because it WAS real, not like made up or something.*

Many students commented on the function of comedy in their plays and how it had helped them deal with the intensity of the material:

*The plays aren't at all funny, but in all three plays there was a good funny thing to lift your spirits. [Girl O, Grade 6]*

*Yes, if it was sad the whole way through, the effect would be a bit depressed. [Boy, Grade 6]*

*The Ghoul scene worked well because the scene before it was dark and like glum and not cheerful so the laughter at the ghoul came at a good time. [Girl E, Grade 6]*

Nonetheless, in spite of an overall sense that the children had enjoyed the challenge of the difficult material, there were a few students who perhaps would have preferred something lighter:

*Next year maybe we could do something not so serious? [Girl, Grade 5]*

### **The messages of the plays**

There seemed to be a universal view amongst the students that their work had important messages to convey to an audience. They often had a sense of a great injustice that had been committed; now they wished everyone to hear about what they had learnt. One student felt that they were 'correcting history':

*I don't think many people know the truth about it [the journalists' murder]; correcting history is a pretty important part of our play. [Girl, Grade 5]*



*'Greg Shackleton' in Timor*

For this report I have not sought personal information on the background of the students who took part. However it is fairly clear from the interviews that the plays had a different, more immediate meaning to students from non-European cultural backgrounds. This may be because the stories we told had direct relevance in the students' family stories, or they may simply have been stories that resonated in their community. The kinds of stories which perhaps often felt hidden or marginalised in their cultural communities were validated and given credence through the play-making process; in their turn the students from European backgrounds appeared to feel that learning about these stories of injustice and helping to tell them to a wider audience was important and urgent.

The school has students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and in general the social dynamic in the groups we were working with was good; there were some issues of cultural difference however and there was one boy who was quite socially and culturally isolated. He was often disengaged and reluctant to give his views and he had very nearly been unable to take part in the final performance due to illness. However he had decided he would

perform in spite of obviously feeling very unwell, and I asked why it had been important to him:

*I wanted to be part of it. I just like it. My brother was going to be there, and he really liked the last one. If I never come to this one, he be disappointed. Some people – I'm the only one who learned the lines. You have to rely on others to know your lines [if you don't show up], so why can't I just do it? It's just in SCRAYP you are a team, part of a team, so they have to rely on you.*

Q: Is this the case in other areas of school life?

*No – just for SCRAYP [Boy A, Grade 5]*

He became very animated on the question of 'messages', especially those he perceived in the Tampa story and Stolen Generation story, which he only saw once as an audience member:

*Politicians, they should let them [refugees] choose their own fate, don't think about "can't I take over" but think how to save the refugees. [Boy A]*

*It's urgent, you know you really need to act, people would die!  
[Girl, Grade 6]*

*Don't just think in favour of your nation. When governments change their minds [a reference to the Rudd government apology to the Stolen Generation], look what happens. In the end, John Howard made a bad decision with the refugees and the aboriginal people, so he lost the election. He wouldn't say sorry to the Aborigines. But when Kevin Rudd got in he changed things for refugees and for saying sorry. [Boy A, Grade 5]*

Boy A's thinking is a little confused here – he is from a Non-English Speaking Background – but this was probably the most complex thinking he had ever expressed to me, and I had a sense that part of why he engaged with this process was because of the relevance of the material to him personally.

Another student from a non-European background told me about some audience responses from her community:

*You know that scene where they run from the soldiers? Well I know people watching where that had happened to them.*

Q: What was that like for them – upsetting or did they want that story told?

*A bit in between... it was upsetting but also it was like their story so they feel happy and sad.*

[Girl I, Grade 6]

The same girl said that the three plays all had one overriding message: 'It's about equal rights for all people'. Another boy (of African background) felt that in some sense the plays served as a reminder of lessons we might learn from history:

*These plays, well they get messages out to people, but they also say you know 'remember what happened' With the refugees stories, it showed how people think refugees aren't human, and the same with **Stolen Generation**, they're not treated as human.*

[Boy H, Grade 5]

A conscious decision was made by two of the teaching artists to cast non-European students in the role of former PM John Howard. In *Stolen Generation* he was depicted on his morning 'power walk', flanked by his bodyguards, acted by a tall athletic African girl. She commented afterwards:

*My aunty saw the play and she said usually black people don't get parts like I did. All the black kids would have to be the refugees on the Tampa.*

In *The Story of the Tampa*, a boy of African background played John Howard in a cartoon half mask. He chose this part as his favourite moment:

*My favourite part was doing the Prime Minister line “We are a humanitarian decent country, but we are not a soft touch...” because you could feel the rage of the Prime Minister, but why, you know? ‘cos most of the refugees aren’t terrorists, they are just like us. [Boy B, Grade 5]*

What did these students think was the impact of a student of African origin playing John Howard?

*It’s good. Anyone can do anything. We can act anyone. [Boy B]*

A student of European background chimed in: ‘My mum thought it was good ‘cos it was saying stuff about how everyone in the play is important’.

A girl of Phillipino background played the part of Jose Ramos Horta addressing the Australian parliament; her spoken English was not fluent and it had been an enormous challenge for her to deliver his words in the play. It was a long speech, written in a formal style and she’d had it written in tiny script on a minute piece of paper concealed in her hand, to consult should she stumble in her delivery. In performance it was incredibly moving to hear these words, in strongly accented English, with occasional long pauses while the actor collected herself to continue, with every audience member willing her through it.



*'Ramos' addresses the Australian parliament*

She chose this as her favourite moment and I asked her why:

*Um when I done my big speech in the parliament? Because I understood those words. It wasn't just because it was the biggest part. It was kinda like telling the truth about East Timor...I don't know how to say...*

Another student: *'Cos you got to say such a meaningful thing?*

*Um, yes, I understood Ramos's struggle,... I stood there to say his words.*

Implied here I think is that her own personal struggle with acting this moment of significance informed her understanding of what it meant. Other students clearly felt this was a powerful theatrical moment:

*Because it was such a heartfelt speech, like when she's saying it, it really made me feel like I was actually there, and really actually listening to it, because it WAS so, yeah, heartfelt. [Girl, Grade 6]*

Although I think the effect of telling these stories was very immediate for those students from non-European backgrounds, students of

European/Anglo backgrounds also felt passionately about the issues and made very perceptive comments.

Girl E: *It [the play] asks them [the audience] what would it be like if you were on that boat? You'd soon change your point of view.*

Girl O: *The audience will think 'it must have been really awful, we've never had an experience like that'. To most people, scenes like this never happen.*



*On board the MV Tampa*

Both girls here are showing a strong sense of empathy for the plight of the asylum seekers. The task of researching, improvising, rehearsing and performing the play certainly involved them in *creative thinking behaviours... considering alternative perspectives, suspending judgment...*[VELS Thinking Processes, Level 5]

A teacher also brought up the subject of empathy in her feedback:

*I think the students all came through the program's experiences with more empathy and understanding of what is important to us all and what all of us hold dear, regardless of race and circumstance. It allowed the students to consider the power of*

*individuals within the system to stand up for principles and stand up and be counted even if it's a minority viewpoint.*

## **Active Learning**

It is difficult and complex to assess how learning is taking place through the projects but the students did respond enthusiastically when asked about how an active learning process differed from a more structured classroom approach. One girl commented:

*It's a better way of learning history. With a book you learn and then forget. But you remember this 'cos it was an amazing play, so you remember the information that went with it. I take it all in 'cos it's the big night. That's how I remember. I still remember last year's!*

A small group of students became very animated whilst discussing the function of emotional engagement on their learning. They brought up the idea of their being emotionally engaged affecting their response to the material, and the following conversation ensued:

Boy H: *You are pumped up!*

Boy J: *You pay more attention when it's in your own words... a play is like a film – you can re-run it in your head and remember different parts. You get more emotion on a stage.*

Girl S: *You can't show emotion in an essay. For an essay you don't need to care. But for acting, if I don't care, what is it? An essay is just words.*

Girl L: *If you're doing these plays you are acting the information. You have to know about it to act it, you have to know how to feel. As you learn more, you think about it more – “this person would be really sad now”. In a way it also happens to you, because you act it. Because it makes you think about what you are doing, you concentrate, you try and remember. If I read an essay I try to remember it but I wouldn't remember it as an experience. You*

*visualise it more [in your memory] because you see it [acted out], instead of visualising words.*

*Girl S: An essay is truly different. There's no sense of communication. Like the part where the government is talking about what to do with the refugees – it's a communication with the audience. And when the refugees shout "no! we can't go back" (etc) – You can't have that emotion in an essay. Experience is so much more powerful.*

*Boy H: [With acting] you can say it, shout it, whisper it.*

I think this exchange is useful to quote in full because it seems to me we see a process of learning unfold here. In the first comment the boy is describing how he felt on stage, with an implied sense that this is significant for learning. The second boy reflects on this and tries to work out the component parts in terms of his learning – it's his own words, it is like a film in that it can be mentally re-run, it is emotionally engaging. Girl S then draws out a comparison with a more conventional learning task – the essay – but is drawn back to the idea of emotion. Girl L considers the craft of acting itself and concludes that for the acting to be authentic or credible 'you have to know how to feel'. Her comment that when one acts something out 'in a way it also happens to you' seem to have pinpointed something very significant in terms of powerful empathetic learning. She has *embodied* an experience and at the same time consciously represented that experience for an audience; she has communicated her deep engagement with the material to others. These two strands – experiencing the deeply felt engagement, and consciously re-creating the moment - which are happening *at the same time*, are somehow fused in the crucible of performance to produce new understanding. Girl S's next comment clearly makes the connection between powerful felt experience and the necessity to communicate that learning – 'it's a communication with the audience'.

Girl L then went on to analyse the impact of this demanding and complex material on an audience of younger students from the school who attended a matinee. What might these younger students

have got out of watching these plays I wondered?

*Girl L: For the little kids if they read an essay about this – well they probably couldn't anyway – but if it was read to them, they wouldn't care, they wouldn't remember. But when they see the plays, they get involved, the actors communicate to them, they are part of it, they might talk about it to their friends. My sister's in Grade 1 and she saw it in the afternoon and then she was talking about it and then she saw it again in the evening, and she talked about it all the way home and she fell asleep talking about it. She felt a sense of understanding, even if she didn't really get all of it.*

Perceptively, Girl L has actually here described a phenomenon which is probably true to some extent for all the participants as well as audience. That is, with deeply felt learning we are not always able to state in measurable terms exactly what it is we think we have learnt, but we know we feel somehow changed by the experience, that something important has happened and that we shared the experience with others.

*Girl S: It changes you, acting someone else's sad story. And they might think it's good that you acknowledge their story by telling it.*

Many students were keen however to have a go at telling me what they thought they had learnt:

*Girl S: The plays make us more aware of what happened. I know more now. I agree with what's in the play, the truth is, John Howard did those things [reference to asylum seeker policies]*

*Boy T: It took a very long time for the Australian government to do something in East Timor, and they should have done something earlier.*

*Girl A: They should do something and not just think about how Suharto gives them oil and stuff [reference to Timor Gap Treaty between Australia and Indonesia] – that's the only reason why they didn't help.*

Had they learnt much about government in a democracy I wondered?

*I learnt that it can be hard to make decisions to suit everyone, and please them all, and also hard to be making the right decision.*  
[Girl, Grade 6]

*Well I learned that governments will keep things quiet if they want to – and why they do that.* [Girl, Grade 5]

*I learnt that Australia and other wealthy countries actually do help poorer countries, but they should help lots more. My knowledge of government also expanded.* [Girl, Grade 6]

*I learnt that sometimes in Parliament, they're always yelling at each other, saying we should do this and that. Instead of putting people's hard work together!* [Girl, Grade 5]

Turning for a moment to the VELS dimension on 'Civic Knowledge and Understanding', I think it is fair to say most students were forced at some level to consider *the principles and values which underpin Australian Democracy, such as equality before the law, freedom of speech...accountability of government, social justice and respect for others*, and to conclude that in all the stories told in this project the Australian government was found wanting in those respects.



*Detention*

Certainly as regards the Stolen Generation and the asylum seekers on the *Tampa* students were able to see how the Australian government became a threat to social justice and eroded human rights.

A teacher, who was not involved in the project directly but who saw the performance, wrote in her feedback:

*This dramatic piece was so much more than civics and citizenship, how governments work and an individual's role in our political system. This is a very important part of the curriculum but often so dry and so hard to breathe life into. These three Government Plays developed these understandings head on and has placed them in a very real context. I am convinced these students will take their right to vote seriously, and be politically aware citizens and careful when it's their turn to choose our law makers and leaders.*

Another senior staff member wrote: *The role of Government and the impact that it has on the lives of people could not have been more compellingly demonstrated.*

Since all the texts had complex event timelines to convey in very limited time I asked students whether they felt they had understood the historical contexts of their plays:

*Well someone asked me about our play so I went and got my script and explained it to them. I think I got it about right. [Girl, Grade 5]*

*I could explain it but not exactly right – I guess I would have liked to spend more time on the history – maybe found out more of the Indonesian side of the story. [Girl, Grade 6]*

This last was interesting – this student is showing *awareness that others may have perceptions different from their own* (VELS Thinking processes, Level 5). It was certainly true that in the time available we were not able to spend as much time as we would have liked on the detailed history of events, though all groups were provided with a wealth of documentary material on their particular story.

Bearing this in mind I asked several groups of students whether they felt our portrayal of the events in the three plays had been too 'one-sided'

*Well you gave us the facts and then we could decide for ourselves if we thought it was right or wrong. [Girl, Grade 6]*

*I don't understand how you could disagree with what we did. Maybe with John Howard in his tracksuit it was a bit exaggerated but they were just showing it as a joke, but not a harmful one. [Boy J, Grade 6]*

Another boy asked him: *What about showing Suharto as a demon?*

*Well it might have been better to show him as a human first, before he becomes a demon, so you know he is a real person. And with the army of demons you should see a line of real people first, then put the masks on – cos they were real people who did those things. [Boy J, Grade 6]*



*Downfall of Sueharto*

It struck me that contrary to the message of the play being too strong, Boy J here is suggesting that the use of a folk tale genre to tell part of the story perhaps lessened the impact, since the audience were free to conclude that “it’s only a story”. This specific point was not voiced by any other students, but in general the students were in overwhelming agreement that they were telling a truthful, important story which needed to be told. In particular, because it was *their* telling of the story it had a resonance for them:

*I enjoyed it how we all contributed to the scenes you know during the process, and we were committed to the group, and we got to have our say, and our thoughts into the play, so we could feel proud of the play. [Girl R, Grade 6]*

*We worked in small groups then you used that in the end product – I liked that. [Girl H, Grade 5]*

*We’d done all those things in the process, then they went into the script, so like it was all our ideas. [Girl L, Grade 6]*



*Shopping*

One scene which was universally loved by the people who were in it, was a scene depicting a desperate Jose Ramos Horta trying to get help from Australians as they shopped for more and more consumer goods on a busy street. The scene was highly symbolic of course; everyone carried impossibly large numbers of glossy shopping bags with logos on them as they walked up and down a busy street accompanied by an inane pop ditty on the soundtrack. Time and again in the interviews, the girls in particular would mention this scene as a favourite. I asked why, and the most usual response was 'because I like that music' or 'because it was funny'. Probing a little deeper revealed that, although those things were what attracted them to this material, most students had a clear idea of what they thought the meaning of this scene might be. This is a sample of a conversation between a group of students:

*Girl P: It was pretty funny, with all those plastic bags. Still some people are like that these days.*

*Girl T: Australia spends too much money!*

*Boy T: And that some Australians are selfish, and they want everything for themselves instead of helping other people and stuff.*

*Girl S: It was about spending too much money, not on something important, just buying stuff that isn't really important.*

*Girl P: It's about how Ramos thinks of what the Wide Brown Land is kinda like. He's thinking that most of the people are selfish, they want things they don't really need.*

*Girl T: It means Australia or the Wide Brown Land is spending too much money and even now some people are just not caring about other people in other countries; it's sort of ... exaggerating what Ramos thinks.*

*Girl R: They [the shoppers] just thought 'oh you're trying to say*

*something to me but I don't care'*

Girl G: *Well I hope it showed people they shouldn't be so selfish.*

Girl C: *I felt those things as well, but some Australians do care and it only showed us being selfish, I don't think that's all it is.*

Girl L: *But people over consume, then they get so wrapped up in buying stuff they forget about the outside world. And even if it was over exaggerated, but sometimes when people are shopping, even if they do care, they stop thinking about that and just are thinking 'sell me something!'*

Girl P was the student who played Ramos wandering amongst the shoppers asking for help, and it's clear that for her, the scene represented an extension of his perceptions, a projection of his experience as it were. Girl T realises the scene was satirical in its cartoonish, 'exaggerated' style. Girl L recognises that we all operate in the culture we live in – we cannot live outside of society, so caring about other people in other countries does not stop us from falling prey to consumerist ideology.

So although the young people had a bit of fun acting the over-the-top shoppers in a consumer driven frenzy, they were still able to have an outside eye and analyse the deeper meanings.

## **Social and Personal Development**

From some of the student comments already quoted it is possible to see the effects on young people's confidence and self-esteem. Many students at the beginning of the process find it hard to imagine that they will achieve so much by the end:

Girl N: *I didn't think I'd do that good in the interrogation scene, but in the end I got really into it.*

Girl O: *It was just a fantastic experience I'll never forget.*

Boy K: *When we finished I wanted to do it all over again! And when we all stood together at the end and everyone [in the cast] is from different countries and the government has finally realised it's done the wrong thing.*

Boy B: *I liked the flashback soldier scene because I looked up and it was my picture on the projection screen!!!*

They took an enormous pride in telling their stories and gained a sense of their own agency when they perceived an impact on the audience:

Girl O: *That letter I read – it was the strongest line I had and it was the one which changed the way people thought.*

Girl T: *Maybe you don't change their opinion but they take it in, they have to think about it.*

Girl A: *I think you do change opinions – it's something to aim for anyway!*

## **Conclusion**

The VELS *Civic Knowledge and understanding* dimension talks about Years 5-8 building breadth and depth in student thinking - *They become increasingly aware of the complexity and diversity of Australian society and the groups that make up that society. They reflect on the values that are important to a democratic, multicultural society.* I believe that the projects these students undertook with teaching artists from Western Edge Youth Arts went a long way towards achieving this outcome, and for some students it did so at a very sophisticated level.

The whole process of responding to stimulus material and constructing dramatic material out of that, is a dialogic one between students and artists; students are given information, both students and artists ask questions, respond creatively with the construction of

art, share their art, receive feedback and analysis, make shifts in their thinking and understanding, and re-work and re-form the material in the light of new understanding. One of our teaching artists is from a refugee background himself and in sharing some of his story, he made it easier both for migrant students to feel more relaxed about sharing fragments of their stories, and for non-migrant students to understand the reality of a migrant experience. In spite of some reservations we may have had about the difficulty of the material, I think the evidence from student reflection showed that the students were engaged by the topic and did indeed “rise to the task” in the words of one Grade 5 girl. The VELS Thinking Processes Level 5 states that students need “challenging tasks that stimulate, encourage and support the development of their thinking” – which I think is clear did take place from the evidence above.

The project fulfilled many of the criteria in the VELS domain of The Arts.

*Exploring the qualities of arts works ...draws on research into the purposes and functions for which the works are created and audiences to whom they are presented. This involves students developing an understanding of social, political, economic and historic contexts and constructs, and developing a consideration of ways that arts works reflect, construct, reinforce and challenge personal, societal and cultural values and beliefs.*<sup>6</sup> The subject matter of all three plays meant students had to think in these terms – of course the complexity of thinking varied from student to student, but I think all students had to contemplate questions in these areas.

The quality of the final product, the ‘art’, was sophisticated; students were able to *communicate ideas and understandings about themselves and others, incorporating influences from their own and other cultures and times.*<sup>7</sup> I think in large part this is because the process was rich and intense and generated a deep understanding of the events the young people were dramatizing.

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<sup>6</sup> VELS: *Exploring & Responding in the Arts - Introduction*

<sup>7</sup> VELS : Arts domain, Creating and Making, Level 4.



*The Clever Girl and the Ghoul*

In an increasingly complex world, schools need to find new ways to develop young people's understanding of world events, and of the role of government, thereby helping to develop a sense of global citizenship. This project offered some approaches to this task and specifically, began to develop a critical awareness of some important recent decisions taken by Australian governments. The affective engagement of the drama process developed an empathetic relationship to others that was highly significant for this culturally diverse school community. The public nature of the performance meant that young people perceived themselves to be agents of social change developing the consciousness of their own community. It is this social context that made this project a socially relevant and challenging learning experience for the young people.